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Rolf Nosterud

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When God Ran Away!

Rolf Nosterud

*Pastor, Redeemer Lutheran Church
Winnipeg, Manitoba*

Text: Mark 1:1-8 (B - Advent 2)

Who would have guessed that when God wanted to announce the dawn of a new age – a New Covenant – God would start with a prophet screaming in the *wilderness*, of all places? Why not have the prophet announce it from the steps of Government House?

Or from the temple precincts?

You would think that God would choose some place of *authority*, at least...some platform that normally issued important commands – so as to *get the people's hearing*!

But no! It's as though God were running far away from the religious establishment, indeed, as far away from *any* human establishment as God could get, so that God could start the New Covenant free of the trappings of human culture! God sends John the Baptist to the edge of the Wilderness, by the Jordan River, to proclaim the coming Reign of God. And John is dressed as barren of vestments and temple finery as possible!

On the face of it, it seems a silly risk to take. Imagine the crowds John could have gotten if he had rented a BIG ARENA in Jerusalem! Astonishingly, John *did* attract crowds!

We wonder, how *did* he get the people out of Jerusalem and the towns? How did he get them to *walk* all the way out to the edge of the wilderness – a day's journey by coach?

I'll bet we couldn't get our young adults to do that – not even to hear Shania Twain or the Rolling Stones!

What was it about John that attracted folks to come so far into the wilderness to hear him?

They came precisely because John *was different*. He represented something apart from the *status quo*.

Maybe we, as Church, could learn something from God's strategy: If God has John set up shop in the wilderness, so that *no distractions* from the cultural "background noise" can taint John's inaugural address, why then do we set up shop in such *status quo* settings? Perhaps our message of "Good News for the Poor in Spirit" is getting lost in the "background noise" of our "Me! Me!" middle-class consumer culture?!

So in a real sense God *was* running away from the temple and all its pomp and priggishness. God *wanted* to disassociate the New Covenant from the comfortable religious establishment of that time, so that the *message* could stand by itself for those who came to hear. And also for those *future* audiences – like you and me today!

Just as God did with the First Covenant that came through Moses, so God likes to bring people into the *wilderness* so they can listen *undistracted* for the *new thing* which God has loosed upon the world!

In other words, this strategy clarifies that the New Covenant is being built out of "new materials" and not just recycled "wineskins" from some past era.

It seems that the flame of God's Spirit had been all but snuffed out by all the cloud and smog of priestly hocus-pocus, and by the stodgy way rituals were often done.

Yes, it can get to be hard to breath in the "mustiness" of such unclean temple air! Do you suppose this is true of many churches in our day, too?

So God ran away into the wilderness, where the air was sharp and clean, out under the stars where, through a misfit in a piece of camel hide, God proclaimed that *Someone* and *Something* really different were coming soon!

It was Someone so special, so awesome, that one needed to get ready! One needed to *prepare* for his coming, so that one could receive him appropriately (the way people used to be prompted on

how to “receive a monarch” scheduled to pass right beside them).

And John said that the appropriate readiness was simply a contrite and repentant heart. He offered a “ritual washing” to help people mark their “turn around” and their fresh start anticipating the *New Life* when God’s Holy One came among them. All the centuries of accumulated Sin, brokenness, pretension, and cover-up are washed away and a *new community* is born!

However, *only those willing to visit their “wilderness”* get to taste this new freedom.

While God calls from the deepest recesses of “our” wilderness, it is up to us to respond, to come toward God as God calls us back to remembrance and renewal in our worship.

Those who insist on staying in their “comfortable city”, in their noisy and trivial religious trappings, may not truly get to *hear* the new message. Certainly they may not get to *experience* the ritual renewal available to them in the coming Messiah.

I think everyone of us here has an idea where our “wilderness” lies and what kinds of painful terrain we must travel in order to submit the soiled and carefully covered over areas of our life to washing and renewal.

Of course, it’s not easy to let go of the “comfort zone” we often settle into – in spite of our pained and anguished spirit which nags us continually for relief.

Good friends: the Good News is always being proclaimed *somewhere* on the edges of our “noisy” and “established” world, somewhere beyond the distractions of our busy and trivial culture.

Good News is waiting for those “who have ears to hear” and “hearts to obey”.

I pray that you will hear the ONE crying out in *your* wilderness, and that you will have the courage to respond – so that you may discover God’s grace and peace that passes all understanding!